Growing up, I always wanted to be normal. I strived to fit in, worried about what others thought of me, especially when they found out that I was in the system. They would say things like, "Are you adopted?" "Your parents didn't want you?" or the most famous one..."What did you do?"

This is how the world views youth, who don't live with their parents, you're not normal. Whether you live in foster care, group care, shelter or treatment...something doesn't add up!

In October of 2011, I was removed from my home at the age of 14 and never allowed to return. My mom struggled with a bad drug addiction while I was growing up, she was in and out of prison; never fully capable of taking care of her children. I struggled in school, displaying behaviors and emotional breakdowns. I started skipping school, because I didn't have a proper outlet for my anger. I lost friends and in extreme cases some of the people I used to call "Family".

I went through four foster homes by the end of my freshman year. By my senior year I was in a residential treatment center. While living there I went to public school; people automatically had preconceived notions about who I was and didn't want to give me the time of day. So I kept to myself; it was really hard to make friends and get involved in things.

When it came to school activities that became a whole new level of abnormal. There was no one to sign permission slips, you see, foster parents or group care staff aren't legal guardians. Most teenagers in high school play sports, join choir or band, attend dances and get their driver's license; not me. It's common for teens to spend the night at their friend's house or even just be able to hang out with their friends; a part of normal childhood development right? Unfortunately, I missed out on all those opportunities. When it came to spending the night with friends, my social worker wanted a background check. "Mom I need your social security number so my friend can spend the night." Awkward!

So today, AMP is asking the legislators to make life normal for youth living in “out of home placements” by ensuring that caregivers be allowed to make parental decisions that maintain the health, safety, and best interest of the child and also decisions about the child’s participation in extracurricular, enrichment, cultural and social activities. All young people need normal experiences to promote healthy brain development. Thank you for your time and interest in Iowa’s youth.